

# LEARNING LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF NELSON MANDELA

by Martine Bisagni

“A fundamental concern for others in our individual and community lives would go a long way in making the world the better place we so passionately dream of.”

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela: 18 July 1918 – 5 December 2013

This week South Africa, indeed, all of us mark the life of Nelson Mandela with mourning, remembrance and celebration.

Last night at the Riverside Church Service of Praise & Thanksgiving in Harlem, the Reverend James Forbes set forth a challenge for the world to use this time as a period of collective self-reflection to ponder what we can do to bring about a better life for everyone.

“The great spirit wants to use Nelson Mandela’s death to remind us that Nelson Mandela believed that all God’s children should have a place at the table and that until that is happening God is not pleased, that all God’s children must have healthcare. Why do some of you hoard your resources while others die for basic necessity? All God’s children must have clothing and shelter and decent education and decent jobs. All the nations of the earth need to hear this.”

Others who spoke echoed similar thoughts as they recalled Mandela’s actions through his life and the effects those actions have had on the world far beyond the fall of apartheid and the establishment of a new democratic South Africa through the labors of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As many with more knowledge of history and politics than I will write about his life during these days, I write about the promise of his life that is now our responsibility to carry into our lives, especially as we utilize his example to teach our children how to live and create in the world.

In our arts organization we often open our doors for community art days for children and their families. For the past four years, it has become clear that while art is important, many of the basics that our children need are even more important. As we try to navigate what it means to be an arts organization in these days, we realize that it is imperative to address the whole child and the whole community and how we live and work together.

At the beginning of this year, the NYC Coalition Against Hunger released the figure that 1 in 4 children in NYC is food insecure – meaning that there is insufficient food in their household on a regular basis. Some say it is not that high.

To focus on the preciseness of the numbers or on the definition of the term is to miss the point. One in six is too many. One in ten is too many. Children should not have to worry about enough food, nor should their parents. They cannot learn to become themselves if their bodies do not have proper nutrition, if their minds do not have education, if their creative impulses do not have outlet and their spirits do not have development. It is an error in our soci-

ety that so many of our families experience or worry about poverty. There is enough to share. One only need look at the wealth and plenty in our city to know there is enough to go around. There is enough worldwide. We must learn to share what we have.

“Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom. Of course the task will not be easy. But not to do this would be a crime against humanity, against which I ask all humanity now to rise up.”

As I read Mandela’s words, I ask how can the world be shared so all lives have fair opportunity? The answers I find are small and quieter than protests or legal battles. They take place in our homes, our hearts and our daily actions. Be generous to each other. Offer assistance where you can. Ask if you need. Do what you can so the lives of children are better.

It does take a neighborhood or village. Teach our children to love justice. Teach them to value fairness over privilege or the pursuit of privilege. Teach them to question their assumptions about what is acceptable and to develop their thoughts as knowledge changes.

Let go of revenge. Cultivate forgiveness.

Invite everyone to the table including those with whom you disagree. Especially those you with whom you disagree, for the open table is the way to reconciliation and a working community. It is important that our children know each other and learn to work together. There is no better way to teach them these values than by our own example. We must work together as if their future depends upon it. It does. If there is anything to learn from Nelson Mandela’s life, it is that living and working together is a real possibility.

As we think about how to work with everyone in our neighborhood, the artists find ways to take what we do into public spaces. Last year on July 18th two of our artists spent MADIBA DAY in Carroll Park making cards, teaching happy birthday in Xhosa, Zulu and Afrikaans, adding the languages of our neighborhood children to the bright poster. It was a great first start of what I hope will be a yearly event to bring the children of our city together celebrating Mandela’s ideals, art, culture and getting to know each other.

That night one of the artists and I went over to celebrate Mandela’s birthday at MADIBA Restaurant in Fort Green. South Africans of every age, hue and accent filled the place from one end to the other making music, singing, dancing and setting lanterns to the sky. The noise and merriment spilled into the streets. The police drove by waving and smiling at the somewhat loud, joyful crowd.

I found myself thinking back to the

1980s when it was hard to conceive that that dreadful government of institutionalized hell would ever break apart and a new South Africa would come together in unity. And yet here all around me ubuntu (humanness) was evident. Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. (A person is a person because of other people.) The more we care for each other the more the world will be the one we dream of.

During open hours on Saturdays and Sundays from 12-5 pm, our artists invite you to come make art to honor and celebrate the life of Mandela. Johannesburg-based Bulawayo/Zimbabwean artist Sindiso Nyoni has created a commemorative portrait for us to share and we have made a learning card for the children. Children and their families are welcome free of charge.

Martine Bisagni is Director of Workshop Gallery Artists Foundation/Brooklyn Workshop Gallery, a nonprofit foundation whose purpose is to promote and facilitate the process of keeping traditional art craft alive and vibrant in our world and to en-

GO WELL AND REST IN PEACE



NELSON ROLIHLEHLA MANDELA  
TATA MADIBA  
18 JULY 1918 - 5 DECEMBER 2013

courage the interpretation and expression of such through the individual artisan. They are located at 393 Hoyt Street. For more information, call (718) 797-9427, or email [martine.bisagni@gmail.com](mailto:martine.bisagni@gmail.com)

There are many ways in our area to learn about Nelson Mandela and to celebrate his life:

## Saturday, December 14, 11:00 am

The Boys & Girls High School will re-walk the route that Nelson Mandela walked during his 1991 Brooklyn visit. 1770 Fulton Street Brooklyn. All are welcome.

New York City Public Library Exhibit through December 21st at two locations: Stephen A. Schwarzman Building (5th Ave at 42nd St, New York, NY 10018, (917) 275-6375), and McGraw Hill/Putnam and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (315 Malcolm X Blvd, New York, NY 10037, (212) 491-2200)

## Sunday, December 15, 6:00 pm

The Official Mandela Funeral Service & Madiba Restaurant Vigil

Screening of President Mandela’s funeral from Ounú in the Eastern Cape, South Africa (195 DeKalb Ave, Fort Greene, Brooklyn (718) 855-9190) For more information on Nelson Mandela and The Elders: [www.nelsonmandela.org](http://www.nelsonmandela.org) [www.theelders.org](http://www.theelders.org)